Opportunities

The sun was shining brightly on Radboud University Orientation week, with the many new students, and great general enthusiasm. We are all looking forward to a beautiful academic year. At the same time, there’s no escaping the crises facing our society. Crises in the Netherlands, in Europe, and around the world, crises of today and of the future.

There are many reasons why this academic year is bound to be exceptional for Radboud University. We’re entering the prelude to our 100th anniversary, with more students and employees than ever. Despite the continued presence of COVID-19, we can once again do our work with almost no restrictions. We have great plans for our Campus, the Recognition and Rewards programme, Life-Long Learning, and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The Netherlands Artificial Intelligence Education Lab is about to be launched, and we have high expectations of the Intelligent Materials Lab. The Dutch Universities and the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences have reached an agreement with Minister Dijkgraaf concerning an exceptionally high financial incentive for academic research. What amazing opportunities and possibilities!

Much of what we will achieve this year is up to us. The cultural shift wrought by the Recognition and Rewards programme is something that we must, and can, realise together: last year we formulated a wonderful vision for it, our plan of action is nearly ready, and we expect to make important progress this year. A diverse, equitable and safe campus is also something by and for all of us. We now have a code of conduct that, combined with a number of guidelines, gives us solid tools to help us in this process. Integrating new employees and students into our academic community in a healthy way is something we can all contribute to, and it can generate much positive energy. At the same time, we know that the future is unpredictable, and filled not only with opportunities, but also with potential threats. How will the situation around COVID-19 develop? What financial choices will the Dutch government make? Will we succeed in filling our vacancies and reducing work pressure? Will students once again find their way to our campus?

The fact that we cannot predict the future doesn't mean we cannot prepare for it. There are many things that we pretty much know are going to happen, and we can predict some of the upcoming opportunities and risks. Radboud University has formulated four scenarios for various situations around COVID-19. We're creating financial stability by working with multi-annual budgets. We're adjusting to the tensions on the labour market by becoming an even broader employer. And we're offering additional support to students, especially those who suffer most from the aftershock of the lockdowns, to help them better cope with potential new setbacks.

However, important factors that greatly affect our lives can sometimes shift unexpectedly. These can be positive, or negative. You could fall in love, or have an accident. There might suddenly be more jobs than you can handle, or a virus could appear that made all fun things impossible.
As a university, we prepare for all potential risks, trying to formulate the best possible answers to known threats. As part of this process, we practise and test our ability to respond, to evacuations, fires, or cyber-attacks. In this way, we create resilience. But we clearly also prepare for opportunities, for example by capitalising on potential research funding or implementing our beautiful new campus plan.

However, history teaches us that the greatest impact comes from events we're as yet unaware of, events that we don't expect, and haven't included in our risk analyses. The recent pandemic and the many ways in which it affected our university, is a clear example of this. In this difficult situation, the university, and particularly its staff and students, showed proof of great resilience.

Of course, there will always be people who ‘predict’ these kinds of events, but for most of us, including most experts, they still come unexpectedly. Think of the financial crisis of 2008, the war in Ukraine, or the Dutch government suddenly taking a strong stance on a forty-year-old problem (nitrogen). We should therefore also ask ourselves: How do we prepare for that which we do not, that which we cannot expect? Incidentally, the same is true of opportunities. Who could have imagined, three years ago, that the Growth Fund would create such wonderful opportunities for our university? The key is therefore not only resilience, but also flexibility.

It's a bad idea to list all potential, in some cases unlikely, risks, and take measures to completely eliminate them. This can only lead to excessive security systems and bureaucracy, and I'm afraid it is the route our society has taken in a number of areas. Think of the asbestos situation, where measures are clearly disproportionate to the risks, or the ever-growing accountability expected from universities. Ultimately, this can lead us to lose any room we have for play. And still, something unexpected can, and will, happen, today, in a week's time, or in ten years. This is of course equally true of opportunities.

A better strategy is to create more resilience and flexibility. But this is easier said than done. It means learning to deal with setbacks, discovering who we are, and what we find most important, and especially, getting to know ourselves. The latter two especially can also help us recognise and seize wonderful new opportunities as they arise.

Flexibility and resilience are certainly not individual qualities only. They are most powerful when developed with others, while learning with and from each other. Together we stand stronger, especially when facing the unexpected and the unknown, whether negative or positive: together we see opportunities more clearly, and are better able to create further possibilities. I think we can all think of examples of this from our own experience.

Radboud University as a whole must also show proof of flexibility and resilience. We need to have a strong identity, and a clear mission and ambition. Over the past period, we've clearly seen how our strategy document, “a significant impact”, could help us by forming a clear guideline at various moments and on diverse issues. Our belief in
personal contact in education led us to deploy the concert hall for teaching. The fact that we’d created inter-faculty groups of researchers meant we were ready to launch fantastic projects as soon as funding appeared.

The many dialogue sessions we had about our identity showed us that this theme is alive and generates valuable conversations. I therefore expect us, as we move to celebrate our 100th anniversary next year, to shape and experience our identity with a renewed and stronger élan, based on key elements such as solidarity, diversity, and emancipation. The core idea underpinning a university, the specific features of Radboud University, and mostly the people who make our university into what it is, have convinced me that we are resilient and flexible.

I wish everyone a beautiful new academic year. I’m sure that it will bring both setbacks and opportunities for us all. And this is why I wish us all the calm and space we need to think, to talk, and to read about our own flexibility and resilience, and that of our society. I’m convinced that this will leave us even stronger by the end of the year.